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# **Mandala: From Sacred Origins to Sovereign Affairs in Traditional Southeast Asia <sup>(1)</sup>**

*by Rosita Dellios*

**The Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies**

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*This paper examines 'mandala' as a tradition of knowledge in Southeast Asia. It marries two concepts of mandala: (1) a Hindu-Buddhist religious diagram; with (2) a doctrine of traditional Southeast Asian 'international relations', derived from ancient Indian political discourse. It also highlights the value of Chinese thought as the 'yin' to ancient India's 'yang', in the construction of a Southeast Asian mandalic political culture. In its investigations, this paper draws on to the writings of key historians of this period, particularly O. W. Wolters, as well as the influential Indian text on governance, Kautilya's Arthashastra.*

## **Introduction**

The Sanskrit term 'mandala' represents a significant tradition of knowledge in Southeast Asia. Normally considered a religious diagram used as a meditational aid, the mandala is first and foremost a construction. So, too, is the notion of 'Southeast Asia' and its history (see Legge 1992; Hong 1996: 66; Evers and Korff 2000: 18). The construction of Southeast Asia as mandala in politico-religious terms is the subject of investigation in this paper.

## **Mandala as a Geopolitical Term**

Mandala is a term employed to denote traditional Southeast Asian political formations. It was adopted by 20<sup>th</sup> century Western historians (most notably, O. W. Wolters 1968, 1982; and I. W. Mabbett 1978) from ancient Indian political discourse as a means of avoiding the term 'state' in the conventional sense. Not only did Southeast Asian polities not conform to Chinese and European views of a territorially defined state with fixed borders and a bureaucratic apparatus, but they diverged considerably in the opposite direction: the polity was defined by its centre rather than its boundaries, and it could be composed of numerous other tributary polities without undergoing administrative integration. Gesick (1983: 3) describes the regional system of the day as a "patchwork construction of larger political units, in which the secondary and tertiary centres preserved a great deal of their internal autonomy in exchange for acknowledging the centre's spiritual authority". Moreover, spheres of influence could shift from one centre to another, so that any sense of statehood was fluid and contingent.

Other terms comparable to mandala employed by historians of pre-colonial Southeast Asia are: 'negara', a Sanskrit term which means kingdom, used by Geertz (1980) as 'theatre state' to denote the region within a town's performative influence; and 'galactic polity' (Tambiah 1976), whereby weaker political units gravitate to a stronger one (see Stuart-Fox 2000: 83-84). All three - mandala, negara and galactic polity - highlight the importance of charismatic leadership in a political system that fluctuates.

Turning to periodisation, 'proto-mandalas' are said to have evolved in the last centuries BCE (Stuart-Fox 2000: 86). The power of the chief was linked to ancestors and animist spiritual beliefs. By the 5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, Hindu influence meant that many of the Southeast Asian kings (both on the mainland and the archipelago) identified with Siva, tapping Siva's power through meditation and ascetic practices (known as 'tapas'). 'Imperial mandalas' are said to have emerged in the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries, a period known also as classical Southeast Asia because it represented the height of material culture. Monumental temple complexes were constructed (such as Ananda in Bagan in upper Myanmar, Angkor in Cambodia, Borobodur and Prambanan in central Java), and economic systems of irrigation-based agriculture and maritime trade were developed. Besides Hindu-Buddhist mandalic polities, there also emerged Muslim ones, such as that of Melaka which took over from the maritime trading empire of Srivijaya. Muslim rulers, too, linked into a religious legitimisation base through propagation of the faith (see Stuart-Fox 2000: 91; SarDesai 1994: 54-58).

The above observations suggest that 'traditional' Southeast Asia was 'mandalic' insofar as it did not conform to European conceptions of the state as a legal, territorial entity but displayed the cosmological characteristics of states of Hindu-Buddhist persuasion prior to the expansion of the modern Western state system. Thus a mandala is not a state in the modern European sense, but it is also not to be deprived of its 'statal' status because of such delimitation. A mandala is a 'statal circle' (Law 1985: 195) of Indian origin and Southeast Asian elaboration. It can refer to a single centre and to a circle of centres. In traditional Southeast Asian international relations one may therefore speak of mandalas as states and inter-mandala relations as international relations within the world mandala system. Whoever can claim the centre of this system, a condition which requires being recognised as such, can claim the title of 'cakravartin' - universal emperor (see Tambiah 1976). To better understand the philosophy from which such thought derives, it is necessary to explore the religious meaning of mandala.

## **Overview: Sacred Origins of the Term and Its Application to Sovereign Affairs**

Sanskrit for 'sacred circle', mandala is an internationally recognised term that sits comfortably in the English language. Even if the term 'mandala' is not used, it is widely recognised as a concept across an array of cultures because of its universality as a form (see Arguelles 1995: 20-21 for a review of the literature on mandala). A typical dictionary definition of the term is that of the Macquarie Dictionary which explains it as "a mystic symbol of the universe, in the form of a circle enclosing a square; used chiefly by Hindus and Buddhists as an aid to meditation". Powell (1996: 312) refers to it simply as "a circular sacred diagram used in meditation and ritual". Further investigation reveals that mandala is a compound word made up of 'manda', meaning 'essence', and 'la' meaning 'container', 'possessor' or 'signpost' (Grey 2001: 2; see also Snodgrass 1985: 104-5 for further variations on the meaning). It is thought to derive from ancient Indian beliefs in cosmic power entering the figure at the centre of a sacred space. The sacred space idea carries with it connotations of integration with a higher consciousness and protection against disintegrative forces. Relatedly, the mandala can also be viewed as a 'psychocosmogram' (Tucci 1961: 25) in which humans become 'centred' and diffuse that state-of-being outwards into action. In geopolitical terms, the resemblance is not difficult to establish. A monarch integrates vertically with the divinity as well as horizontally across a territory of people, land and resources organised in the form of 'vassal loyalties'. Such 'unity' (spiritual and political) protects the realm from disintegrative forces, internally and externally. This model - and its spiritual blueprint - is elaborated below.

## **Principles and Philosophy of Mandala**

The mandala's construction adheres to three principles: those of centre, symmetry and cardinal points. As Jose and Miriam Arguelles (1995: 13) point out:

The first principle is constant; the latter two vary according to the nature of the Mandala. Symmetry can be bilateral or dynamic - rigid and well defined, or absolutely fluid. The

cardinal points may be precise in number, the amount depending upon the mandala situation; or the points may be infinite, and nonexistent as in a circle.

The paradox of the mandala is that while it is structured in a centred, symmetrical and directional mode, in its Hindu-Buddhist formulation it seeks to impart the view of the illusoriness of the world (or 'samsara'), of reality as 'empty' - "being without essence, without a stable core" (Brauen 1997: 15); that "all things actually lack the independence and unchanging continuity that they seem to possess" (Cozort 1995: 12). Indeed, the mandala construction is based on a philosophy that requires a recognition of the emptiness of appearances. Only by doing so will the individual become self-less and hence free of attachments and cravings. Such a state, in Buddhist thought, permits a greater openness to life; a compassionate disposition to others. Buddhist ethics derive from this position. Giving up the delusion of a self permits a life-affirming practice of helping others to avoid suffering and to fulfil their potential.(2) Thus the cultivation of a higher consciousness - of enlightenment - equates with happiness. In Tibetan mandala iconography, which is discussed in greater detail below, this is represented by the union of Tantric deities: the male principle, representing compassion and method; and the female principle, representing wisdom and insight into the emptiness of all things (on *unio mystica*, see Brauen 1997: 63). An example of this may be found in the tradition 'The Chakrasamvara Mandala', depicting Kalacakra and his partner Visvamatr.

The concept of emptiness is analysed in 'Dukkhasamudaya-ariyasacca', translated as 'dependent origination', 'co-dependent origination' and 'causal interdependence' (Feldman 1999). It is the Second Noble Truth, of the Four Noble Truths, which Buddha taught in his first sermon, and which form the foundational teachings of Buddhism. These are (*The Teaching of Buddha* 1966; Rahula 1978): (1) 'dukkha', which connotes suffering, imperfection, impermanence, emptiness and insubstantiality; (2) 'samudaya', the origin of dukkha; (3) 'nirodha', the cessation of dukkha; and (4) 'magga', the way by which such cessation may be achieved (the Eightfold Path of right understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration). In the Buddha's teachings on samudaya (cited in Feldman 1999):

When there is this, that is.

With the arising of this, that arises.

When this is not, neither is that.

With the cessation of this, that ceases.

In other words, "everything is a succession of appearances whose source is a succession of causes and conditions" (*The Teaching of Buddha* 1966: 88). The appearances of the mandala are, paradoxically, designed to teach this lesson and induce the adherent to seek the liberation that lies beyond delusion. This is because while the "world of delusion" is produced by the mind, yet "it is also from this same mind that the world of Enlightenment appears" (ibid.: 86). Appearances are turned into tools for probing appearances, and nowhere is this spiritual technology more ritually developed than in the Tibetan tantric tradition,(3) which symbolises "emptiness in the shape of deities" (Brauen 1997: 61), as well as displaying 'disappearances' whereby deities are represented by their absence.(4)

Essentially, the appearance of an aspect of Buddha-nature, represented by one of the five Buddha manifestations,(5) in the form of a mandala, helps the adherent undergo the path of Buddhahood. Meditation on, and visualisation of, one of those five Buddhas (called 'the deity') enthroned in the centre of a palace-like mandala is a common method practised (known as 'deity yoga'). The objective is for the practitioner to identify with the deity and hence the qualities represented by the deity. During visualisation, the painted mandala is used as an aid to memory. For example, the Vajrasattva Mandala, dedicated to the Vairocana Buddha - "the ultimate Tantric teacher" (Huntington 2002:18) - represented at the centre by the 'vajra' or the "male part of the Tantric polarity: the symbol of effective means of the Buddha's active compassion with the meditating person" (Hansen 1996).

Mandalas may be three dimensional in the form of a stupa, for example, Borobodur, built in central Java in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. They are more commonly known in their two dimensional form, as in the impermanent sand mandalas used for ritual purposes by Tibetan monks or the more lasting painted mandalas (thangkas), used by devotees. The human body may also become a mandala through the practice of yoga (linking of the body with spirit), so that the 'manda' ('essence' or enlightenment) may enter 'la', the 'container' or body. As Meulenbeld (2001: 78) notes:

By means of concentrated energy rising up along the spine, one attains the apotheosis of the process of union in a lotus-shaped mandala at the crown of one's head. This is where light breaks through the spiritual darkness. The thought behind this is that, according to the tantras, humans are vessels full of ignorance, but also vessels with a divine spark in their most profound depths.

It may be concluded that the mandala in its sacred dimensions is a centring device for spiritual purposes. It is, in a word, a psychocosmogram; the human connects with the cosmic by centring on the 'divine spark' or essence. To facilitate the process for the devotee, the essence is represented as a deity. The devotee, in identifying with the deity, engages in a higher state of consciousness. This also translates to spiritual power, because the human has merged with the divine. When this idea is transported to the political field, within a religiously oriented society, it permits a political leader to also claim a degree of divinity or, in the Buddhist case, a high degree of merit. Such was the case in early Southeast Asia. However, to make the transition from tantric meditations to regional geopolitics, it is first necessary to become acquainted with Southeast Asia's ancestral political mandala, that of the classical Indian strategist, Kautilya.

### **Kautilya's 'Mandala of States'**

Law (1985: 195) defines mandala as a 'statal circle', explaining that:

The publicists of ancient India used to apply the term *mandala* to a cluster of states, the activities of which were likely to be actually brought into play by the political actions of any one of them.

The mandala as statal circle is referred to in various ancient sources. These include the Hindu epics, *Mahabharata* (especially its 12<sup>th</sup> book) and the *Ramayana*; the *Puranas*; and the *Manusamhita*, which is the law book ('Code of Manu') on Hindu religious and social behaviour, said to derive from Manu, the progenitor of humanity. Most importantly in terms of specificity are the treatises on polity (6) - such as the *Nitisara* ('Essence of Politics') of Kumandakiya, the *Nitivakyamrta* ('Nectar of Aphorisms on Politics') of Somadeva Suri, and the celebrated *Arthashastra*, attributed to the Mauryan Chief Minister, Kautilya, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The statal circle, for the purposes of strategic theorising - or 'deliberations', as Law (1985: 196) terms it - was usually structured as a 12-state system (sometimes more, sometimes less), with one of the 12 states being selected as the 'vijigisu' to serve as the mandala's orienting centre of strategic planning ('deliberations').

The statal circle is constituted thus:

- a centre ('vijigisu') ;
- in front of which are five states in five zones, these being 'ari' (enemy), 'mitra' (friend), 'ari-mitra' (enemy's friend), 'mitra-mitra' (friend's friend), and 'ari-mitra-mitra' (friend of the enemy's friend);
- while to the rear of the vijigisu are four states in four zones, these being 'parsnigraha' (rear-enemy), 'akranda' (rear-friend), 'parsnigrahasara' (rear-enemy's friend), and 'akrandasara' (rear-friend's friend); and
- adjacent the vijigisu are two states, 'madhyama' (medium power) and 'udasina' (paramount

power).(7)

- "Thus there are four primary Circles of States, twelve kings, sixty elements of sovereignty, and seventy-two elements of states" (Kautilya 1968: 293, vi: 2).(8)

While the root meaning of *vijigisu* is conqueror, this term should not be taken in the purely military sense. Destructive wars of conquest would risk obliterating the *mandala* as an interstate system. Mabbett (1978: 36) alludes to the 'soft power' of the *vijigisu* in seeking "not the destruction of other *rajyas* [kingdoms] (which would cause the *mandala* to cease to exist), but their submission and homage to his glory". Indeed, Kautilya (1967: 295, vii: 1) offers a number of options in inter-mandala relations, of which war ('*vijraha*') is only one. The others include such diplomatic staples as the pursuit of peace through treaty or alliances and a posture of neutrality. The course of action chosen is dependent on the *vijigisu*'s sovereign circumstances, which comprise (Kautilya 1967: 289, vi: 1): the king, the minister, the country ("territory with subjects", according to Law 1985: 202), the fort, the treasury, the army, the friend (ally), and the enemy. The quality of the king's leadership is central to the other elements of sovereignty (Kautilya, 1967: 291, vi: 1):

Excepting the enemy, these seven elements, possessed of their excellent characteristics are said to be the limb-like elements of sovereignty.

A wise king can make even the poor and miserable elements of his sovereignty happy and prosperous; but a wicked king will surely destroy the most prosperous and loyal elements of his kingdom.

. . . a wise king, trained in politics, will, though he possesses a small territory, conquer the whole earth with the help of the best fitted elements of his sovereignty . . .

It may thus be concluded that the 'wise' king's body ('limb-like elements') of sovereignty, is the hub (or 'nave', see below) of the wheel of states. The image of the *mandala* as one of centre and circumference is well represented at the end of Kautilya's Book Six, 'The Source of Sovereign States' (ibid: 294):

Throwing the circumference of the Circle of States beyond his friend's territory, and making the kings of those states as the spokes of that circle, the conqueror shall make himself as the nave of that circle.

This passage, perhaps more than any other, resembles the sacred circle of the contemplative and ritualistic *mandala*. At this point the apparently secular calculations of geopolitics enter the orbit of religiously defined power. Here the discussion spreads beyond India and to a 'Hinduising' Southeast Asia. A ruler of an early Hindu-Buddhist kingdom would be viewed as "concentrating and preserving cosmic Power" (Wolters 1999: 94, citing Anderson 1972), which for a Buddhist king would specifically derive from "accumulated merit" through a concerted effort at self-mastery and Buddhist dharma (Wolters 1999: 95). In this the king was a '*dharmaraja*'. His role as '*cakravartin*' occurs in the expansion of his *mandala* under a 'just war' doctrine known as '*dharmavijaya*'.(9) Being Hindu-Buddhist, this doctrine took care of the entire environmental system, human and natural. The Greek diplomat Megasthenes noted while at the Mauryan court that Indian armies did not attack farmers - "regarded as a class that is sacred and inviolable, the tillers of the soil" - or engage in any 'scorched earth' policy that would destroy the environment: "they never ravage an enemy's land with fire, nor cut down its trees" (cited in *A Tribute to Hinduism - War in Ancient India* 2001; see also Basham 1967: 55 on the reconstructed works of Megasthenes).

Such was the milieu of thought which the Southeast Asian ruling elite absorbed in what Wolters (1999: 110) termed 'self-Hinduisation'. Most evident was the adoption of Sanskrit texts, names and ideas - notably that of *cakravartin* - but also a religious attitude of a spiritualised world. This resonated well with the existing indigenous animist belief structure whereby everything - be it rock, river, tree or animal - is imbued with a spirit that requires proper ritual regard, lest it causes harm but

also in the hope of harnessing its protective power (see Barwise and White 2002: 37-39; and McNeely and Sochaczewski 1991). Ancestors, too, were ritually cared for. The early Southeast Asian world was indeed a magical place. It was also highly mandalic in both the religious and political meanings. How it diverged from the Kautilyan construct is examined below.

## A Southeast Asian 'Circle of States'

Early Southeast Asian polities differed from their Indian counterparts in that the notion of 'ekacchatra' ('one-umbrella sovereignty') (see *A Tribute to Hinduism - War in Ancient India* 2001) was not as highly developed. This was largely for reasons of diverse geography (mainland and archipelagic) and associated historical experiences. Certainly the title of cakravartin was widely adopted as an ideal, but its implementation in the form of an imperial state would have hardly seemed relevant in polities with strategic depth, such as Angkor, which lasted for six centuries; or reliance on maritime trading networks such as Srivijaya. The Vietnamese on the Red River Delta, by comparison, were compelled by the threat and example of China to develop a strong imperial state of their own.

Another unrealised dimension of the Hindu world was that of caste: Southeast Asian societies did not privilege lineage or social position as much as 'persons of prowess'. Indeed, the Burmese, who were among the earliest recipients of Indian culture among the Southeast Asians, are noted for having "exercised discretion, rejecting the Indian hierarchical caste system and giving women a high place in society" (SarDesai 1994: 30). An individual's achievements - not birth status - were considered indicators of spiritual power. In this, the Siva and Visnu 'cults of kingship' in Southeast Asia were far more attuned to a spiritually sourced meritocracy. Thus, as Wolters (1999: 111) observes:

Hinduism did nothing to bring a "kingdom" into being with its own permanent identity. Instead a cult of kingship developed in the form of a personal cult of a Siva-like person who had seized the kingship from someone else. Political allegiances would therefore be no more than the sum total of the personal religious concerns of other chiefs who believed that their Siva-like overlord would provide them as individuals with additional means of earning merit if they submitted and served him . . .

In ancient India the political mandala - or statal circle - was more a secular affair in a territorial state than the divinely imbued variant that was nurtured by the court brahmins of Southeast Asia. These learned ritual specialists, who formed the priestly class, were deemed to be the "prime agents" (SarDesai 1994:16) of the spread of Indian culture to Southeast Asia.(10) They were more interested in promoting the Code of Manu than the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya. It is true that within Indian thought may be found both divine and contractual attributes of monarchy (see Basham 1967: 82-84), yet it is also the case that the key texts for governance - preeminently, the *Arthasasta* of Kautilya - are considered secular works with a "predilection for endless and pedantic classifications and definitions" (Law 1985: 211, expressing a prevailing view of the *Arthashastra*). Such detailed attention to the many facets of society, from the 'detection of youths of criminal tendency by ascetic spies' (iv, 5) to the 'formation of villages' (ii, 1), suggests a developed sense of state control, even if it was not entirely realised. Basham (1967: 81) concludes that:

Probably in no kingdom of ancient India, not even in that of the Mauryas, was the influence of the state quite so all-pervading as in the system envisaged by the *Arthashastra*, though the author evidently based his precept on current practice.

Such 'statism' was even seen to make opportunistic use of a king's perceived divine connections, as Basham (1967: 84) adds:

The author of the *Arthashastra* had no illusions about the king's human nature, and seems to have had little time for mysticism, but he recognised that legends about the origin of kingship had propaganda value.



That which links the mystical with the secular conduct of state is the notion of protection, and the maintenance of order, for which the king was responsible. Hence the *Arthashastra's* detailed duties of internal affairs (law and order, social welfare, economics) as well as external affairs (inter-mandala relations of diplomacy and war) are designed for the protection of society and its values. This is done within the armour and authority of state, which was "merely an extension of the king" (Basham 1967: 90). It may be postulated that the difference between the secular slant in the Kautilyan statal circle and the widely recognised Southeast Asian mystical path to power lay in the latter's conception of the protective role of the king as a function of cosmically-endorsed order. This philosophical disposition with its greater reliance on the Code of Manu than the treatises on polity did not, however, cloud the strategic lessons of the *Arthashastra* in practical matters of state security.

This is illustrated by Wolters (1968) when he describes how the Ayudhyan king Naresvara "demonstrated a pronounced sense of the rear side of the world of Ayudhya" (ibid., 174) - that of China, Korea and Japan - in his diplomacy of 1592. This was the year when Naresvara offered to help China resist an expansionist Japan under Hideyoshi. "Japan was seen as a powerful 'rearward' enemy, likely to become an immediate and dangerous one unless Hideyoshi were humbled. In these circumstances China was Naresvara's 'rearward' friend" (ibid.).

The statal circle was also well understood by Angkor's founding king, Jayavarman II, who was officially described as "the conqueror of the circle of his enemies" (Higham 1989: 259). Angkor as a study of a mandalic polity is instructive on a number of levels and hence worth elaborating.

Founded in the 9th century in the lower Mekong basin after an unstable period of warring chiefdoms, Angkor lasted nearly six centuries as the centre of Khmer royal power. At a ceremony performed by an Indian brahmin on Mount Mahendra (near Angkor) in 802, Jayavarman II was proclaimed cakravartin and regarded as an incarnation of Siva. Upon his death in 850, his son, Jayavarman III, followed as king until he too died in 877. Then came Indravarman who reigned until 889 and his son, Yasovarman I whose rule ended in 900. The latter was the first king to take up residence at Angkor. Succession was not necessarily hereditary, despite future kings' attempts to contrive royal genealogies. As Taylor (1992: 159) points out:

Genealogies and claims of blood relationship with previous kings were part of the legitimizing process, but the mechanism of succession remained sensitive to the ability of claimants to assume command at Angkor.

In its heyday in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Angkor spread its mandalic polity over present-day Cambodia, the Mekong Delta, and parts of Laos and Thailand. Yasovarman's reputation was heightened by his monumental works: monasteries and temples in honour of Siva, Visnu and Buddha were built in mandala formation, and as a microcosm of the universe. Another king, Suryavarman II (reigning 1113-1150) was responsible for building the renowned Angkor Wat. A new capital city, Angkor Thom with the impressive Bayon temple, was constructed by Jayavarman VII, who ruled from 1181 until his death circa 1218/19. The temples served not only a religious function but acted as centres of administration, craftsmanship, and as warehouses for grain (Barwise and White 2002: 54-55; see also Evers and Korff 2000: 27). Thus the temple system, owned by the nobility, was part of the management of a wealth-producing agricultural base. Specifically it relied upon irrigated ricefields that were advantaged by Angkor's location on the northwest shore of the great inland lake, Tonle Sap. Its agricultural success was such that it could support a population of a million people (compared to only 35,000 people in London, for example) (see Osborne 2000: 2) as well as the mandala of temples which, in turn, maintained the system. All of the above leads to the conclusion that the construction of temples signified more than the king's relationship to divinity and hence charismatic claims to power: they signified the 'state' as a mandalic construct. The sacred and the secular visibly combined.

When the end did come to Angkor, it came from three discernible trends (see Wyatt 2001: 22; Taylor 1992: 163; and SarDesai 1994: 29-30): rebelliousness among vassal states; a shift in economic power from rice cultivation to foreign trade, especially with the development of the ceramics industry in

Siam; and a change in religious orientation to Theravada Buddhism or, as Taylor (1992: 163) puts it, "from a religious culture that was priestly to one that was monastic". The Khmers abandoned their capital in 1434 and established a new one in Phnom Penh. Ayudhya, in turn, became a dominant mandala.

As Angkor illustrates, Southeast Asian rulers tended to favour a religious, even cult-like, centre for a political mandala which displayed geopolitical calculations. Does this suggest a certain hybridity? That which is clear is that Wolters, the prime exponent of mandala as a term for traditional Southeast Asian international relations (that is, inter-mandala relations), did not intend it in its religious meaning of a sacred diagram. The latter he distinguishes as "another use of the term" (Wolters 1999: 139). He did, however, link the mandala political system to a religious culture that attributed higher spiritual powers to the ruler.<sup>(11)</sup> This is not to say that the mandala as sacred diagram was irrelevant. A ruler would make use of mandala meditational practices to increase his spiritual potency (Wolters 1999: 139), thus giving him greater power to fight his enemies and attract allies.

The earliest Southeast Asian polities, even when Sanskrit inscriptions began to be written, were the personal and somewhat fragile achievements of men of prowess and had not been transformed by institutional innovations in the direction of more centralized government. A polity still cohered only in the sense that it was the projection of an individual's prowess. (Wolters 1999: 21)

Like the Buddhist meditational mandala which is constructed to teach the emptiness of appearances, so too the political mandala of traditional times "always remained personal and impermanent; it was not a mapped territorial unit" (Wolters 1999:114). Moreover its centre was not to be confused with 'centralisation': "Centrality was defined through kingship, and accordingly, 'centre' implied the location of the palace and the king as articulator between heaven and earth" (Evers and Korff 2000: 30).

Mandalas were not only descriptions of a tribute system to a charismatic centre of attraction. There were also "mandalas of conflict", as Wolters (1968: 176) pointed out with regard to the Myanmar wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which embroiled the "Burmans, Mons, Shans, Northern Thai, Lao, Khmers, and Ayudhya Thai". Indeed, such mandalas of conflict are a well recognized phenomenon throughout time: now they are called 'regional security complexes' (Buzan 1983; Buzan and Waever 2003) or, more generally, referred to as the 'security dilemma' in international relations with its ubiquitous 'balance of power' metaphor (see Little 2000). The difference between international relations today and inter-mandala relations in Southeast Asia's past is that there was no recognition then of equality among independent polities. Each mandala was idealised as divinely ruled and universal (cakravartin). It was ideologically not possible to recognise another cakravartin. As Wolters (1999: 39) notes:

No matter how relaxed inter-regional relations normally were, the paradox of a cluster of self-styled "unique" centres reduces the possibility that *mandala* centres would accept each other on equal terms and gradually develop closer relations with each other.

The idea of a universal monarchy is present in the epics, such the *Ramayana*, and in the *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta*, a text from the era of the Mauryan king Asoka (Basham 1976: 84, footnote), who brought a Buddhist morality of non-violence to 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE India. Renouncing wars of aggression after witnessing their horrors, Asoka sought only the *moral* conquest of the world. Such a king is understood to be a 'world conqueror' or 'universal monarch'. Needless to say, this idealistic concept was later used by ambitious rulers as a pretext for war.

The significance of the concept of cakravartin for the traditional international system of Southeast Asia is that 'mind' was privileged over 'matter', the ideal over the real: mandalic Southeast Asia comprised a number of sub-regions, each of which conceived of itself as the true centre of the wider

region, even though it did not put into practice this notion.

## Attributes of the Traditional Polities

Taking into account the above-noted principles of the mandala - those of centre, symmetry and cardinal points - what conclusions may be drawn about traditional Southeast Asian political mandalas? Jose and Miriam Arguelles (1995: 13) observed that the first principle, that of a centre, is constant. This translates to the cakravartin - the notion of a centre, radiating outward in the person of a divinely-imbued king. The centre may thus be said to consist of *power that is personal and devotional rather than institutional*. This is not the power of conquest that is being described (though military power was viewed as a consequence), but the ability of the leader to tap into 'cosmic power', be it as a Hindu 'devaraja' (king of gods) or a Buddhist 'dharmaraja' through virtuous behaviour. Thus such a leader represents the charismatic centre of a mandala and is considered a person of 'prowess' (Wolters, pp.94-5; and Christie 1983). As Chandler *et al.* (1989: 60) explain:

Hindu-Buddhist traditions of kingship, introduced into Southeast Asia by the seventh century A.D., saw the monarch as a repository of *karma*, or merit, linking the kingdom to the cosmos and as possessing, both in his person and in his office, a relationship with the invisible world by which his body and his actions were made sacred.

Symmetry, the second principle of mandala, is said to vary and "can be bilateral or dynamic - rigid and well defined, or absolutely fluid" (Arguelles 1995: 13). The Kautilyan statal circle with its forward and rearward friends and enemies displayed a strategic symmetry that was well deployed by King Naresvara in offering to assist China against Japan in 1592. In a wider civilisational sense, Southeast Asia found itself at the centre of a Sino-Indic pilgrimage and trade circle that reached even farther afield to the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

Symmetry relates to the third principle of mandala: cardinal points. "The cardinal points may be precise in number, the amount depending upon the mandala situation; or the points may be infinite, and nonexistent as in a circle" (Arguelles 1995: 13). The cakravartin concept speaks of universality through moral conquest, while the trading regimes of the port-based mandalas required a network of intelligence that spread well beyond the immediate confines of the sub-region. Here, too, in the practicalities of trade between China and India, and beyond that to Arabia, Africa and Europe, the cardinal points extended. In terms of security, also, the mandala could spread to Northeast Asia and Europe. Moreover, to return to the centre, 'men of prowess' were not identified through lineage descent but through personal achievement and "the priority of the merit-earning present" (Wolters 1999: 39). There was thus a forward-looking and strategic attitude on the part of would-be overlords, who would cast their net out to the world in a wide sweep. They would bring in ideas and technologies as they deemed fit - including tantric spiritual technologies from India.

Taken as a whole, the mandala is a sacred circle because of its transformational qualities. Like alchemy, it transforms raw materials into spiritual gold. So, too, the statal circle in Southeast Asia displays a propensity for transforming disparate chiefdoms into "networks of loyalties" (Wolters 1999: 34; see also Reid 2000: 188), and thence to sovereign power. This power, which could be activated for protection against enemies, was also a wellspring of merit dispensed to the participating mandala vassals and their subjects: "When kings shared their abundant store of merit with their subjects, the latter's chances for salvation by a better rebirth were significantly enhanced" (Ang-Thwin 1983: 57). The circuit was both physical and spiritual.

Such an arrangement may also be viewed as the principle of *human loyalties rather than territorial acquisitions*, which admittedly was often more ideal than real. Nonetheless such was the aspiration. Power was measured in terms of people (a scarce resource in early Southeast Asia) rather than land (which was in abundance). People were also important for their productive capacities in food production, temple building and in the maintenance of religio-cultural institutions. The emphasis on people over land did not mean land was insignificant - especially in view of its spirits and sacred

places. Rather, it tended to flow on as a result of acquired loyalties from other mandalas. Angkorian Cambodia is noted as the most stable mandala territorially, having remained "virtually territorially intact" for half a millennium (Wolters 1999: 36).

## **Conclusion: Southeast Asia in the Wider Sino-Indian Mandala and the Concept of Dao/Unity**

*Words have an ancestor and affairs have a sovereign*

(Lao Tzu 1963: Bk 2, LXX: 171).

The conclusion to this paper is captured by a statement from a philosopher not from the Indic world but from Chinese civilisation. It is to be remembered that China also exerted its 'gravitational pull' on the region, but in a more subtle, yin-like fashion. The active yang of Indian literary, religious and governmental culture in Southeast Asia appeared to be matched by the yin of China's "shadowy overlordship".<sup>(12)</sup> This manifested in China's tribute relations with Southeast Asian polities, its chronicling of their histories and social practices, and its direct influence, the inevitable element of yang within the yin, <sup>(13)</sup> on the institutions of one Southeast Asia polity - that of the Viets in the Red River Delta. In terms of symmetry, too, Sino-India correspondences emerge. The classical Daoist philosopher, Laozi (Lao Tzu), like the Hindu god Siva, so readily adopted from India in the 'cult of kingship' in Southeast Asia, was a counter-cultural hero - perhaps mythical, perhaps historical - who did the unexpected and shook his followers out of complacency. To Siva's 'god of destruction' (destruction of ignorance, that the world may be built anew), must therefore be added Laozi's break with Confucian convention.

To the wilder, mystical, pair of Laozi and Lord Siva must be added the strategic realists: Sunzi (Sun Tzu) and Kautilya. Master Sun's *The Art of War* is much shorter than Kautilya's exhaustive *Arthashastra*. Yet both show a respect for a virtuous leader while permitting deceptive strategies to their generals. This was because there was a higher cause to which their schemes were dedicated. Kautilya, who must surely be considered the father of classical mandala geopolitics, was dedicated to protecting the Mauryan Empire against foreign invasions through unity. Similarly, Indian influenced institutions in Southeast Asia ensured the king's duty as cakravartin was directed toward unification as an ideal in the interests of protection. It reflected the power and protection that came from metaphysical unity. Such an ideal was shared by the Chinese of the time, in the form of the doctrine of the unity of Heaven, Earth and the human order. Such a mutuality was philosophically and ritually upheld by the king, 'Son of Heaven'. Thus despite mandala's clearly Indian etymological ancestry, it finds spiritual resonance with Chinese doctrines of unity.

This is worth noting because the mandala polities of Southeast Asia are distinguished in the academic literature (for example, Wolters 1999:25, 109; Stuart-Fox 2000: 87) from the Chinese conceptions of state as centralised and bureaucratised. While this distinction finds validity in terms of 'features' of the Hinduised mandala and the Sinocised imperium - such as "the absence [in mandala polities] of a Chinese-style professional bureaucracy and of genuinely dynastic institutions" (Wolters 1999: 30) - the differences fade when considering the ideological esteem displayed by both for unification. As Pines (2004, forthcoming) argues, the 'Great Unity' ideal in Chinese political culture explains China's "repeated resurrection" as a unified empire (see also Dellios 1997: 214). Thus, to borrow from Laozi, not only do words have an ancestor, but affairs have a sovereign. Whether that sovereign be the Chinese emperor as 'Son of Heaven' or the cakravartin of a Hindu-Buddhist kingdom, there is a supporting metaphysical notion of unity: 'tianxia' ('all under Heaven are one'), 'li-yi-fen-shu' ('the principle is one and its manifestations are many'); of the Hindu deities being symbolic representations of Brahman (God); as with the Buddhas for meditation (such as Vairocana and Amitabha) being aspects of Buddhahood. Spiritual reality - or the Dao (the Way) - may, in this way, be seen to be sovereign in mandala kingdoms. However, as Laozi (1963, Bk 2, LXX: 172) went on to say: "It is because people are ignorant that they fail to understand me." Ignorance, desire, and aggression, the Bhavacakra ('Wheel of Life') mandala teaches, are at the nave of an imperfect world. Hence the

mandalic experience incorporates the empirical realities as well.

This, then, is the 'mandala' as a tradition of knowledge in Southeast Asia. Seen as a Hindu-Buddhist religious diagram as well as a doctrine of traditional Southeast Asian 'international relations', the basic concept of mandala connects the inner world of contemplation with the outer sphere of geopolitics, within the historical framework of traditional Southeast Asia.

## Endnotes

1. This Research Paper was adapted from a paper presented at the *Traditions of Knowledge in Southeast Asia* conference, Universities Historical Research Centre in cooperation with SEAMEO Regional Centre for History & Tradition, Yangon, Myanmar, 17-19 December 2003. Rosita Dellios is Associate Professor of International Relations, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Bond University.

2. According to the Mahayana ('Greater Vehicle') school of Buddhism - practised predominantly in Tibet (with its Vajrayana or Tantric branch of Mahayana), China, Korea and Japan - the path to liberation is to liberate others from suffering. Mahayana's ideal is the Bodhisattva, a noble being who defers release from rebirth in order to return to save others from suffering. By contrast, the older Theravada ('Teaching of the Elders') school states that individuals are responsible for their own liberation. Its ideal, the Arhat ('worthy one'), becomes enlightened and thus released from rebirth through meditation on the Buddha's Dharma (truth). Theravada Buddhism is practised predominantly in Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

3. Tantra is both Hindu and Buddhist, and refers to both texts and practices. In Hinduism it is often associated with Siva and his Sakti (divine energy). In Buddhism it features Vajrayana (the reality of emptiness) and associated meditative practices. The Tantra texts in Tibetan Buddhism give "often cryptic directions of advanced yoga and meditation" (Hansen 1996; see also Schuhmacher and Woerner 1989: 354-5).

4. An example is the empty shrine of Vajradhatvishvari in Nepal where female wisdom aspect of Vairocana is represented as "a vacuity" in line with the "neutral state between the phenomenal and the noumenal aspects of existence that the Buddhist tantrin seeks" (Huntington 2002:19).

5. Vairocana (mirror-like wisdom), Ratanasambhava (wisdom of equality of all things), Amitabha (discriminating wisdom), Amoghhasiddhi (all-encompassing wisdom), and Akshobhya (wisdom of reality of all things) (Huntington 2002: 19, Fig. 6; Brauen 1997: 110, Table 12).

6. See Law (1985: 402-418, Lists III & IV) for a compilation of 107 manuscripts and 14 printed works on 'Polity or its Sub-topics'. Basham (1967: 81) also lists works on statecraft from the two great epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*; sections of the *Smṛti* on sacred law; the political texts on polity (above); as well as "ancient literature as a whole, from the *Rg Veda* onwards" with their information and inscriptions on political issues.

7. Madhyama is the "sovereign who is more powerful than either *vijigishu* or *ari* but less powerful than the two combined" (Law 1985: 200, citing *Arthashastra*, vi: 2; and *Kumandakiya*, viii: 18). Udasini is "stronger than each of *ari*, *vijigishu*, and *madhyama*, but weaker than the three combined" (Law 1985: 201, citing *Arthashastra*, vi: 2; and *Kumandakiya*, viii: 19). According to Shamasastri's translation of *Kautilya's Arthashastra* (1967: 292-3, vi: 2):

The king who occupies a territory close to both the conqueror and his immediate enemy in front and who is capable of helping both the kings, whether united or disunited, or of resisting either of them individually is termed Madhyama (mediatory) king.

He who is situated beyond the territory of any of the above kings, and who is very powerful . . . is a neutral king (udasina) . . .

8. The footnote (p. 293) to the text specifies these as:

(1) The conqueror's circle of states; (2) the enemy's circle of states; (3) the Madhyama king's circle of states; (4) the neutral king's circle of states. As each of the twelve primary kings has five elements of sovereignty, the total number of elements is sixty. These sixty elements with the twelve kings amount to seventy-two elements.

9. According to Aung-Thwin (1983: 53):

[The king] was to subdue others primarily by moral persuasion and example [under the ideology of dharma-rajā]; if unable to do so he might use force, but then it must be solely in the interests of the Religion. Thus, although he was projected as a righteous ruler, kingship like kingdoms, was a political entity that had to be justified by certain Buddhist precepts concerning (inevitable) war and killings. Therefore, wars became variably efforts to seek the holy relics, proselytize Buddhism, and acquire the 'pure texts'.

10. There is a paradox here. How can Indian brahmins be the harbingers of Indianisation in Southeast Asia when there are religious prohibitions on them travelling abroad, an act considered to be ritually polluting? De Casparis and Mabbett (1992: 287) suggest that only a few came from India, these being "ambitious men lured by the hope of honour and fortune in a distant land". Judging by the names of the court brahmins, most would have been Southeast Asians who gained their education in Indian ashrams (ibid.).

11. Divine kingship in its various elaborations - including the Malay 'daulat' or 'divine aura' (Johns 1979: 64) - is a cross-cultural phenomenon evident in pre-modern world history. As Larif-Beatrix (1995: 63) observed, "the old religious cosmogony" transformed into political systems as exemplified in "Babylon, Egypt, India, China and Southeast Asia, as well as the empire of Charlemagne in Europe". Indeed, religion gave "history's various *mandala*-builders their sanctity and legitimacy"; for example, in Babylon the monarch was known as "king of the four directions of the universe" (p. 65). The distinction between the 'divine right' of Christian rulers in medieval Europe and the divinity or semi-divinity of Hindu and Buddhist rulers in Southeast Asia is that the Christians had their rule sanctioned by 'God', but they themselves were not God. The Hindu and Buddhist kings, by comparison, continued the Hindu tradition of possessing divine powers (see Osborne 2000: 42) as well as of being spiritually empowered through high levels of 'merit'.

12. Watson (1992: 15) employs this description of 'suzerainty' to give a sense of its 'soft power' (power of attraction rather than coercion) and even fragility. Unlike the more clear-cut case of sovereignty, China's suzerainty was dependent on relationship maintenance through diplomatic, trade and ceremonial means. Force was an option of last resort.

13. The complementary polarities of 'yin-yang' are the female (yin) and male (yang) principles in Chinese philosophy. According to the Daodejing [Tao Te Ching] (Lao Tzu 1963, XLII, 94) "The myriad creatures carry on their backs the yin and embrace in their arms the yang and are the blending of the generative forces of the two."

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